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SUBJECT: BASSEY SUGGESTS POSTPONING DISENGAGEMENT

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Gene A. Cretz for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Yonatan Bassey of the Disengagement Authority (SELA) said on April 18 that it was his idea to postpone disengagement until after Tisha B'Av because the timing would be better for religious reasons. He noted that the settlers have been more responsive to SELA in the past two or three weeks, and that even residents from Netzarim are quietly talking to him. Bassey continued that two-thirds of the settlers will eventually live in the area around Ashkelon, but the protected dunes there will not be damaged. He said that someone should buy the settlers' greenhouse equipment because they have started investing in new greenhouses outside the Gaza Strip, and will take their equipment with them. He suggested that if the U.S. wants to help Prime Minister Ariel Sharon with disengagement, the USG should focus on helping the settlers by freeing Jonathan Pollard because Pollard is very important to them. End summary.

Postponing Disengagement

12. (C) Yonatan Bassey, Director of the Disengagement Authority (SELA), told Economic Counselor and Officer on April 18 that the idea to postpone disengagement was his. He said that the period of Tisha B'Av, which he described as mourning the destruction of the First and Second Temples, and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, is "the worst three weeks for Jews to leave." Bassey said that he feels very close to the settlers, even if they do not feel close to him, and that he thinks it is better "for religious reasons to postpone." According to Bassey, disengagement should begin after August 15 (Note: Tisha B'Av is through August 114. End note).

13. (C) Bassey said he thinks that PM Ariel Sharon may be considering the postponement. In Bassey's opinion, Sharon needs the extra time to talk to the settlers to help them understand why Israel is evacuating them from the Gaza Strip. Bassey commented that Sharon has talked to the settlers without him because the settlers see Bassey as the enemy. He explained that Sharon apologized to Bassey for meeting the settlers without him, and said that Sharon is not working against him. According to Bassey, he and Sharon are "playing good cop, bad cop."

Relocating and Compensating the Settlers:
Dunes are Safe, Citrus Groves are Not

14. (C) Bassey noted that the settlers have been more responsive to SELA since the Knesset vote on the referendum and passage of the budget. He explained that only 70-80 families have asked for compensation so far, but now SELA is "really negotiating" (Note: When EconCouns and Econoff walked into the SELA office, an office assistant was preparing 1,008 compensation application packages for mailing. End note). Bassey commented that even settlers from Netzarim are now quietly talking to him, but declined to mention any names to protect them. He said the settlers told him they would argue publicly against disengagement but in the end they would leave. He noted that he never thought these settlers would talk to him two or three weeks ago.

15. (C) Bassey continued that many of the settlers want to go to the Ashkelon-Nitzanim area. This is a problem, however, because the Mehadrin Company owns about 1,000 acres of citrus groves in the area and these groves will have to be uprooted to build villages to accommodate the settlers. Bassey said Mehadrin would have to receive compensation from the government, but since he is a partner, he "wants to stay out of it." He mentioned, however, that Mehadrin would not be adversely affected from having to relocate.

16. (C) Bassey claimed that the "Environment Ministry talks too much" and that no one is going to destroy the protected dunes north of Ashkelon. He explained that 450 families will move to Kfar Hanoar in Nitzanim, and that the GOI will build two or three new villages between Ashkelon and the dunes to

house other settlers. He said about two-thirds of the settlers will eventually live around the dunes, but not inside. Bassey commented that settlers from the northern West Bank settlements would probably go to Afula, and that about 50 settlers may move to the Negev on their own.

17. (C) Bassey noted that the majority of the 70-80 families that have applied for compensation are from the northern West Bank settlements. He also commented that he just bought the land in Kfar Hanoar a few days ago where the 450 families will move. Bassey reported that one option the settlers will have will be to receive some of this land instead of compensation for their land in Gaza. He mentioned that some settlers have requested to live in temporary caravans right across the street from their future homes in Kfar Hanoar because they think the GOI will renege on this land-for-land deal if they are not physically present there. Bassey opined this is crazy because the settlers will need schools and Kfar Hanoar cannot accommodate their educational needs right now.

Settlers Rebuilding Greenhouses

18. (C) Bassey mentioned that he was trying to negotiate that the Palestinians begin caring for the greenhouses a few weeks before disengagement so that the Palestinians could "get used to it." He also said that "the Americans are lazy" because they are not doing enough to encourage the transfer of assets, and that he is afraid the settlers will take all the equipment and destroy the buildings. Bassey reported that if no one buys the settlers' equipment in the next three weeks, the settlers will take it with them to the new greenhouses they are investing in near Kibbutz Nahal Oz, just east of the Netzarim settlement outside Gaza. He explained that the Israel Lands Authority gave them about 1,000 acres from the kibbutz, and that they have begun construction there; the settlers will work on this land because Ashkelon is only about 20 minutes away.

Security

19. (C) On security matters, Bassey claimed that the settlers will disarm. He said, however, that Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz should not have stated publicly that the settlers talked to him because this would make them feel guilty and ashamed. Bassey reported that the police and the military will undertake the evacuations together because it will be a difficult process and Israel does not have enough police for the job. He explained that the Gush Katif bloc would be evacuated through Road 242, the Kissufim Road, but did not comment on the northern Gaza Strip settlements.

How the U.S. Can Help: Free
Pollard, Money for the Negev

110. (C) Bassey suggested that if the U.S. wants to help Sharon with disengagement, the U.S. should focus on the settlers themselves. He said that one way to make them more comfortable with the evacuation would be for the U.S. to free Jonathan Pollard. Bassey explained that Pollard is very important to the settlers, and his freedom would be a significant gesture.

111. (C) Bassey said that aid to develop the Negev and Galilee is important, as well. According to Bassey, since the budget is aimed at the disengagement plan, Israel needs funds for the Negev because it is important for the GOI "to continue to develop" the region.

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